

# Command hub: Great Falls 911 Dispatch aims to save crucial seconds

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Doug Sunderland, a 911 dispatcher at the Great Falls Police Department, sends out an ambulance for someone who fell at their home. TRIBUNE PHOTO/LARRY BECKNER

Amy Heser controlled a citywide chessboard with the tap-tap of a few computer keys while speaking in code.

"277, 299," Heser said inside the Great Falls 911 Dispatch Center, waiting for the two police officers to respond. "I have a suspicious. Caller says she got home and her door got kicked open. She says that she hasn't been inside, so it's unknown if someone is still inside. It looks like her stuff is still in there."

"277. 10-4," one said inside her head-set, followed by "299. 10-4."

The room buzzes with hundreds of phone calls every day and fingers running across keyboards. Alarms ring for medical emergencies, and voices relay information to and from officers, deputies and fire engineers.

Every call in Cascade County — whether it's an emergency or someone inquiring into what direction is Scottsdale, Ariz. — are funneled into the room on the first floor of the Great Falls Police Department.

"If you don't like helping, you shouldn't have this job," said Karl Upton, a 911 dispatch shift leader.

Upton said they once received a call that bounced its way into Great Falls from the mountains of Alberta. A man was hunting and he was having a heart attack, and the Great Falls dispatch center stayed on the phone with him for an hour and a half while they contacted the Royal Canadian Police.

"They sent a helicopter and rescued him and saved his life," Upton said. "It was pretty amazing."

The job all comes down to wanting to help people, Upton said.

"We save seconds, seconds save lives," he said. "The best thing we can gather from a person is an address, and we'll take it from there."

The dispatch center prioritizes hundreds of calls, and the No. 1 mission is to save lives. No. 2 is protecting property, and then you have all rest, Upton said.

But the job of a 911 dispatcher is more than receiving phone calls and sending emergency personnel to the scene. They're also the voice inside their ear and angel on their shoulder.

"We do a lot of things behind the scenes like investigative work for the cops," Upton said. "We can check names and plates and warrants. We check out the backgrounds of people, and we make sure the officers, before they get there, are given the information to protect themselves."

If a person has a blood-borne illness and it's in the system, the dispatchers will relay that information as a 10-37 medical just in case a suspect decides to spit on them or is cut during a tussle, he said.

A 10-37 red warns the officer that the suspect is violent or doesn't like officers.

"We have a computer out of Helena that we can check anybody nationally, Guam, and through Canada," Upton said. "Basically, if you're in the system at all for being a bad person, we'll check on ya, and we'll get something back."

He said it's pretty neat when their plans come together.

The lights inside the dispatch center are so dim it seemed that the only glow came from the many computer screens surrounding the three dispatchers and the shift leader.

Heser's eyes dart between her four screens, as she types badge numbers and addresses, dispatching police patrol officers like rooks and knights.

"290, are you 37 over there?" Heser asked. Or rather, are you OK?

An earlier call Heser received turned out to be a burglary, and badge number 290 was in the house. The suspect stole a gun, so the dispatchers work as a team. The gun's serial number, make and description are compiled and entered into a computer system that can be pulled up later in case the gun is pawned or found.

The system runs stolen gun checks, stolen article checks, as well as runaways and missing persons.

The life inside the dispatch center, even when it's quiet on the police scanner, is hectic. At one time Heser may be listening to all the officers, looking up a license plate, driver's license, as well as paying attention to her partner who is requesting a police backup for a fire.

"(Multitasking) is a character trait you need to learn. It's not something you need coming in," she said. "Even new people, if you think you can multitask with the best of them, it's totally different when you're multitasking in here."

When Heser got hired six years ago, she knew nothing about it, and never once in her life did she think she would be a 911 dispatcher, but she said she loves her job.

Calls can range from the extreme emergency to the ridiculous, but each one must be taken seriously. And the dispatch center has a little way of relieving the stress, and that's to be funny.

"You can't be serious 24/7," Upton said. "We have to have fun because we deal in very stressful situations, and we relieve some of that by laughing."

And, Upton likes to remember, not everything in this world is bad.